



Stop and Smell the Roses: Avoiding Burnout

- *Ecopsychology in Clinical Practice*

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NHS Shetland, the health authority in the Scottish archipelago, has authorized doctors to prescribe interactions with nature as a supplement to traditional health care. The hope is the practice will demonstrate to the traditional medical community the value of such non-traditional and subtle treatments to the health of the human body and mind.¹

This article will discuss the importance of establishing a connection to Nature in relation to the healing, and maintenance of good health, of the mind and body. Lending credence to the theoretical connection between the human body and the natural environment is a recent development in Scotland. At the behest of a local health authority, doctors there recently have begun prescribing time in nature for the treatment of mental and physical ailments, including: anxiety, depression, diabetes, and arthritis. This should be of great interest to naturopathic doctors (NDs) because NDs are trained to work with the *vis medicatrix naturae* (healing power of nature) yet, how many NDs actually incorporate nature into their practice?

At its essential core, burnout is defined by a lack of connection to oneself and one's environment. Burnout is insidious, and can affect patients and practitioners alike without their having a full awareness of its potentially crippling effects. These effects can often manifest years after an initiating trauma as is evidenced with post-traumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder both of which can be resistant to a strictly pharmaceutical treatment approach.

In the 1990s Lawrence Calhoun, PhD, and Richard Tedeschi, PhD coined the term *Post Traumatic Growth* which is a construct of positive psychological change that occurs as the result of one's struggle with a highly challenging, stressful, and traumatic event.² Rather than being life-ruining incidents, positive psychologists see how a wide range of traumatic events can be catalysts to one's leading a better life, with more resilience to future adversity.

How can NDs as physicians, assist our patients who may be struggling with a lack of connection with themselves and the world around them? What are some easy-to-incorporate practices for working

with patients struggling through difficult life transitions, such as: the death of loved one, a lost career, or a life-limiting diagnosis? How can we encourage a shift through post-traumatic stress into a field of healing and *post-traumatic growth*?

Ecopsychology, a developing branch of transpersonal psychology, offers a profound path for navigating traumatic life events that can lead to burnout. It explores forming healthy relationships with ourselves and the world in which we live. It is psychology in the context of the Earth; a blending of psychology, spirituality, and deep ecology. The natural world provides a beautiful context for healing, where examples of interconnection and healing exist everywhere, and ecopsychology considers the concept of spirituality and interconnectedness within this realm. It draws upon the observation that as humans have evolved industrially, our connection to nature has gradually been lost.

Psychology of Separation

Sigmund Freud delivered a series of lectures in 1901 titled "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life" which established psychology as a province of medical science. The modern philosopher Theodore Roszack who gave voice to the term "ecopsychology" observes that it is "peculiarly the psychiatry of modern Western society that has split the 'inner' life from the 'outer' world – as if what was inside of us was not also inside the universe, something real, consequential, and inseparable from our study of the natural world."³

Carl Jung said, "as scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man [*sic*] feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional 'unconscious identity' with natural phenomena...His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied."⁴ Ecopsychology stems from a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings and our interconnectedness with our environment. Ecopsychology proposes that people living in the westernized industrialized world have been traumatized through their continual separation from and the destruction of the natural world to which they belong.⁵

Ecotherapy in Clinical Practice

The process of "ecotherapy" is easy for any naturopathic doctor to incorporate into their practice. For example: consider taking a "Natural History" with each patient. This is an account of the time

the patient spends in nature, their connection to the natural world, and favourite memories of nature. Even in a difficult case-taking scenario, a natural history allows a patient to share memories and peak experiences of the natural world. As a preamble, reiterate the concept of the *vis medicatrix naturae* and the ability of our mind and body to move naturally in an integrated way towards healing and wellness, sometimes despite prognoses and predicted outcomes. Examples of questions to ask for a nature biography are:

“What are some of your favourite memories of Nature?”

“How is Nature an ally for you?”

“What are some lessons you’ve learned from the natural world?”

“Have you ever witnessed the birth of an animal, hatching of an egg, or of a butterfly or moth?”

“How does Nature view you?”

“How do you view Nature; does it vary with season or location?”

With very enthusiastic patients, and with awareness of time constraints, an ND might ask the patient to work on an eco-biography as part of their initial homework. This is a journal-style account of some of their experiences in Nature and how those experiences have informed their lives. Ask the patient to comment on their current health concerns and how they might find tools and lessons from their previous experiences of the natural world. A patient’s eco-biography then forms a blueprint for bringing Nature as a teacher, resource, and guide into the wellness plan.

Taking a Session Outdoors

Taking a session outdoors is an incredible way to utilize the healing power of nature. Ira Orchin, PhD, author of *Taking therapy outdoors: How to use nature to get tough cases unstuck*, states that “almost any client, except the most impaired, can benefit from a session outdoors.”⁶ Suggest taking a brief walk with your patient outdoors when challenging issues come into the session. You could also take a case while walking in a nearby natural setting with a patient. Even in the most bustling of metropolises in Canada, we are blessed with many parks and green spaces, often within a brief walking distance of our offices. If an outdoor session near the office is not possible, then a pre-arranged meeting time at a mutually convenient public natural setting can be an option.

It is necessary to maintain appropriate privacy policies when having a session outside of the office, and to have a brief conversation with your patient about agreed upon practices. For example, should you run into other people known to either person, if or how would they introduce the other. Having an agreed upon written policy before taking a session outdoors is useful for clarity of boundaries. I always offer to the patient, that if we happen to encounter anyone they know, they may introduce me by name only, or by name and my professional identity.

When working with nature as therapy, ask a patient to experience his/her body as it relates to nature. When case taking becomes

challenging, ask a patient to tell their pain to a tree or other natural object while you observe silently. This practice works remarkably well with teenagers and other patients who have difficulty expressing what is at the root of their angst to another human being.

Naturalizing a part of your clinic grounds is a very convenient way of bringing Nature into your practice; even a balcony in the city can be “spruced” up with potted plants and a little bamboo curtain. When making a home visit ask the patient to show you their backyard or garden and ask questions about their favourite plants or garden decorations. Conversely, there is much information in an untended, wild patch of land as well. *Wabi-sabi* is the Japanese aesthetic of appreciating beauty that is imperfect and impermanent, including asymmetry, simplicity, and wildness.

Identifying With Nature

The natural world is a cornucopia of readily available therapies and treatments that can be incorporated into the patient’s treatment plan at no cost. The use of natural objects as “oracles” can be incorporated into an office setting. Keep a small stock of different rocks, sticks, feathers and other natural objects in your office on a shelf or in a corner, or ask a patient to bring in a natural object they gather from outdoors. Questions to use in this practice include:

“Tell me about this object.”

“Which of these objects is like you?”

“How does this object reflect where you are now in your life?”

“How does this object reflect how you are stuck in your life?”

“Which object reflects the direction in which you are growing?”

Any item can act as a platform for metaphor; butterfly cocoons and snake skins are very powerful in this exercise!

Role-playing with nature is another easily utilized and powerful key to expanding a patient’s behavioural and emotional repertoire. Suggest that a patient role-play by taking on the role of a non-human being. In working with difficult encounters of the patient’s life-journey ask how a deer, bear, mouse or a hawk would have approached this encounter. In some situations, Mouse has the advantage in the “most sane” way, in others it is Bear.⁷ Or consider suggesting other nature elements such as water, fire, wind or rock as emotional backdrops.

Ask your patient, “Which element was most alive for you as you experienced this situation?”

Another ecopsychology-based practice is called “Place Bonding.”⁸ This practice encourages a cultivation of intimacy with a specific natural setting – a place that is consistently relatively undisturbed by human interaction. The patient is encouraged to sit in this space and observe and *be observed* by Nature. Ask the patient to track subtle changes in the landscape and its inhabitants with the passing seasons. Questions such as, “What’s happening in your garden

now?” or “How is your natural place different now?” will encourage patients to pay attention to the subtle changes of the natural world and offers a convenient starting point for follow up appointments that are scheduled quarterly or semi-yearly. Patients are encouraged to track their relationship with nature and to work with nature symbols as well.

“The idea that we live in something called ‘the environment’ is utterly preposterous...”

The world that environs us, that is around us, is also within us.

We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it; it is bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh.”

- Wendell Berry

The Four Shields of Life

The practice of Place Bonding calls to attention the four temporal seasons as a model for the Four Shields of Life: a) birth/death, b) childhood, c) adolescence/young adulthood, and d) adulthood/eldership. The central idea of the Four Shields theory⁹ is that the four seasons of Nature and their corresponding four directions are reflected in four different personas or “shields” of human nature. The theory offers a language and model as a source of therapeutic exercises and homework for the patient. It is an ancient paradigm, a model for the cyclical nature of life: Spring/East represents birth and the place of spirit, Summer/South represents childhood and the physical aspect, Fall/West represents adolescence and early adulthood with its mirroring in emotion, while Winter/North represents late adulthood and eldership with its emphasis on lessons of a life well-lived.

The thread linking all the applications is the premise that Nature and human nature are one and the same, that human nature *is* Nature, that natural processes are mirrored in our own human psyches. With each season, or shield, come the various gifts, talents and shadow aspects of the associated phases of life. This model takes the form of the North American indigenous medicine wheel, representing the cyclical nature of life as opposed to the Western concept of life as linear and chronological. Working with this model, a patient can map out a medicine wheel of his or her life, looking for the lessons, talents, and obstacles within each season. As an introspective tool, it can help to map a person’s life story, enabling them to see where there is an imbalance in the shields, for example: where Summer or play needs to balance Winter and stillness or where Spring and rebirth can be balanced with Fall and introspection.

Take a Walk on the Wild Side

A “Medicine Walk” or “Contemplative Nature Walk”¹⁰ is a powerful experience that can be assigned as homework. This mini-fast takes the form of a three- to six-hour solo experience in nature without

food, external distractions such as cell phones/gadgets or interaction with other human beings. If working with a particularly challenging life experience or existential dilemma, ask the patient to formulate it in the form of a question that he or she can take to Nature. Ritual is an important aspect of this exercise as it formalizes the exercise with personalized meaning.

Ask the patient to create a simple intention around the question, such as “May I find clues, answers and tools from Nature to help me find understanding/healing around this issue.” Ask the patient to, as they begin the medicine walk, create a threshold to cross and signal to themselves and Nature his or her entry into a sacred space. The threshold could be, for example, a stick placed on the ground, a natural arch or bend of a tree limb to walk under, a scattering of tobacco, white sage, or cedar (three of the sacred herbs in indigenous practices), a sprinkling of water or tea from your thermos, or simply a pause to ask a question aloud before commencing the walk. The patient then focuses on their question, asking it repeatedly in silence or out loud as they walk or sit in Nature and observe messages, signs or natural activity while they reflect upon their question. An important aspect of this exercise is not only to notice what the natural world has to show them, but also to reflect upon how they are being *observed* by Nature.

A Medicine Walk is a powerful exercise in helping to shift perspectives so that fresh and novel insights come to mind and heart. As a contemplative exercise it is a potent catalyst for deepening understanding and insight into a person’s challenging life experiences that may have created a need for healing. This is also very effectively done in group settings with “Council Practice” at the beginning and end of the workshop, where participants can share their intentions, questions, and experiences of their Nature Walk. A group setting can facilitate powerful healing experiences especially when focused around central traumatic themes such as sexual/physical abuse, addictions, or life-limiting diagnoses.

Wilderness Rites of Passage

More intensive is the practice of Wilderness Rites of Passage, which involve a facilitated two- to four-day solo wilderness fast. It should only be attempted under skilled supervision with ample preparation time, education, survival instruction and experienced therapeutic direction. Based on the Indigenous practice of the Vision Quest, which marks transition from one life-stage to the next, Wilderness Rites of Passage are a practice of recognizing old identities or patterns of behaviour and allowing them to die with dignity. New ways of being can develop and expand from the experience. The practice involves the careful consideration of *intention* for the Vision Quest, *severance* practices to disconnect from limiting paradigms, entering the *threshold* time in sacred space and enduring the fast with limited protection from the elements, and following rebirthing and *reintegration/reincorporation* practices to cultivate a deepened awareness and sense of self.¹¹ This practice can help with challenging transitions in life such as the ending of a relationship or transitioning from one career to another, healing through layers of trauma, or coming to terms with a life-limiting diagnosis such as cancer.¹²

Environmental Responsibility

As stewards for natural healing practices that consider the health of the environment equally important as the health of the individual, NDs can also facilitate environmental restoration and sustainability practices within our own communities as therapeutic exercises. Encouraging patients to get involved with a local community eco-project such as a community garden or volunteering for an environmental clean-up project are practices that enable healing on both an individual and the global scale. Even encouraging patients to compost to enrich the soil facilitates a sense of shared healing, environmental responsibility and interconnection with their elemental environment.

Making beauty in a wounded place is healing for both the environment and those that it environs. On June 15, 2019 (the third Saturday of every June), Radical Joy for Hard Times will host its annual Global Earth Exchange. On this day, people from around the world gather in a natural area that has been scarred by human or natural acts (pollution, industrialization, climate change, etc.) and offer gifts of beauty. It is a bold, healing, and beautiful event and people submit their photos on-line from all around the Earth.¹³ www.radicaljoyforhardtimes.org

The process of ecotherapy can take many forms and can be easily incorporated into any therapeutic setting. It is, however, necessary for the naturopathic doctor incorporating ecotherapy within their practice to be able to identify issues of transference, counter-transference, the therapeutic alliance and professional ethics.¹⁴ Naturopathic doctors engaging in ecotherapy practices need to remain objective, and be aware not to respond to patients' disclosures from a point-of-view of personal agenda or preference.

Both the ND and the patient must understand that the shift towards the inclusion of ecopsychological content is a shared responsibility of both the patient and the ND. The inclusion of these practices are one method to align practitioners and our patients with the philosophies that define naturopathic medicine and that do not separate human nature and Nature.

These practices will also help to bridge the practice of medicine itself towards an integrated and truly holistic art and science; an art and science which seeks to heal the entire person on a multiplicity of levels by incorporating the best of science, holistic theory, skill, and compassion, with an enduring respect for the *vis medicatrix naturae*. 🌿

About the Author

Dr. Denis Marier, ND, MA is a graduate of CCNM and taught the "Art and Practice of Naturopathic Medicine" from 2003-2007. He graduated from Naropa University in 2008 with an MA in Transpersonal Psychology (Ecopsychology Concentration). His connection with his Métis ancestry has propelled him further along his journey of healing trauma, both personal and intergenerational through Vision Quest and other nature-based therapies. As an ecopsychologist, Dr. Marier has a focus in bringing nature-based practices into his work. He is an artist and Wilderness Therapy Guide and offers wilderness rites of passage/Vision Quest programs, medicine walks, original totem drawings and other nature-based practices through Tribe Academy (tribeacademy.ca).

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